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### Curated regions of the north

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Penny Fielding

## Curated Regions of the North: The ‘Scottish Border’ and the ‘Transpennine Corridor’

### Abstract

This paper takes two regions separate in time and space: the Scottish Border in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the route across the Pennines between York and Lancashire. I look at two instances—in literature and visual art—of how these otherwise disparate social and geographies have been nominated as regions through hierarchies of curation. Comparing ballad publication in the earlier period, and the 1998 Artranspennine exhibition, I show how the curated region is a model that responds to the heterogeneity of local places and artistic production, but is also underpinned by a more idealistic vision of human experience.

### Key words

Artranspennine98 exhibition, Walter Scott (1771-1832), regionalism, curating, ballads, northern geography, transpennine corridor, Scottish Borders

Regions have long been associated with art. From the regional novel in the early twentieth century to artists’ colonies like St Ives, both books and visual art have been called on to represent or define particular spaces in Great Britain. In this study, I draw some comparisons between two different ‘regions’, one at the turn of the eighteenth century and the other in the 1990s, and between the publication of books and the organisation of an art exhibition. My purpose is to explore acts of curation that imagine strong connections between art and local history and geography, but that also, explicitly or implicitly, assume a hierarchy of understanding, in which a person or an entity can claim a ‘right’ to define the region in terms of artistic value. To think of a region as curated opens up questions of how it is delimited, and how its contours are shaped. Curation is a self-conscious act that moves away from the region as natural or given, and before I turn first to the literary region of the Scottish Border and

then to the Artranspennine exhibition of 1998, I want to consider the usefulness of the idea of curation as an alternative to received ways of defining a region.

In the complex terminology of spatial geography, there is no more tantalising a word than ‘region’. An almost infinitely flexible term, it can nevertheless be invoked for specific purposes that are quickly understood. Amid the abstract philosophy of the interrelations of and distinctions between ‘space’ and ‘place’, ‘region’ has taken root in the more material discourses of economic planning, local government and the distribution of resources. But the discourse of regions is also infused with a debate about their spatial ontology: how they come into being as identifiable geographical spaces, what a region *is*. At the heart of this debate is a tension between two different structures that bring the region into being. The first assumes that a region can be determined by the larger structure of which it is a part. It is this usage that feeds into the idea of the region as economic structure, and reminds us of the Latin etymology of the word, taking us back to the idea of ‘regiment’: the rule of the King. Regions of this kind tend to have fixed borders as their purpose is administrative and their representation tends to be expressed in a statistical form (for example, population or language distribution).

The second way regions are imagined is much more centripetal, in contrast to the external identification of regional extents and limits. According to this model, a region gathers itself organically, growing out from something autochthonous that precedes the naming of the region. This is often associated with landscape (for example, ‘The Lake District’) but also with the language, customs, food and so on of the people who live there, usually described as a ‘community’, and is a model that closely associates the term ‘regional’ with the concept of the ‘local’. Needless to say, this is not a very stable binary. The local works away at the heart of the regional to destabilise its singular identity: the local is what is unique to each region, differentiating them from one another, but being ‘local’ is an iterable

identity with its affective associations of homeliness and familiarity – we feel that the sense of being local to somewhere is a shared experience. Thus the region often falls into the paradox of the local that blurs the singular with the typical – all local places are different, yet they are all recognisable in the same way.

Regions are also born of regionalism – they have a political motive. Here again, such motives are not as clear as they might at first appear. Regionalism is frequently thought of as an alternative to, or protest against, nationalism – a space to protect marginalised identities or to ensure a more equal distribution of resources than the metropolitan centre would otherwise permit. Regionalism within the European Union has often had this effect, identifying economic or (as we shall see) cultural regions and supporting them in ways that go some way to circumvent their relation with the nation state. On the other hand, the region as resistance to the nation has a history of returning to the very ideas of group identity that it had apparently sought to resist. Here is a classic statement of what regionalism is: ‘Regionalism is born of a sense of identity and belonging that is shared by a region’s inhabitants; this sense of community springs from an intimate relation to the natural environment; and since a regional community is by definition a small part of a larger whole, a regional community is necessarily a marginal community.’<sup>1</sup> The repeated focus on ‘community’ reminds us that an act of inclusion is also one of exclusion. It is not always the case that regions are marginal – they are frequently invoked to represent an unchanging (or more usually pre-modern, pre-industrial) space that specifically evokes a national ‘character’, in opposition to a feared global sameness. Nationalist movements often draw on this technique, prompting Roberto Dainotto to ask the question: ‘Can it be that “regionalism” is the metaphor of an old desire for authentic identity that nationalism, fallen into disrepute, can no longer represent? Can it be that regionalism is, in other words, just a nationalism without nations?’<sup>2</sup>

These geographical structures, the region as regulated or as organic, have also been used to define artistic and – especially – literary regions. Modern state funding of the arts depends on a concept of a region that is separate from, yet refers to, a metropolitan centre. ‘Regional’ theatre, for example, is regional because it is not based in a capital city rather than because it belongs to one particular area. Regions are in this sense regulated from outside themselves. In literary history the term ‘regional’ has settled in a comfortable usage to describe forms of cultural experience that allow the impression of the consumption or assimilation of regions identified by their internal characteristics. This phenomenon has a great deal to do with tourism, and its most direct manifestation is the emergence of the literary region in the early twentieth century. The publishing house A & C Black brought out a string of popular volumes, dividing the country up into discrete literary regions: *The Hardy Country* (1904), *The Thackeray Country* (1905), *The Blackmore Country* (1906) and so on. This geographical technique is also a commercial one. The ‘literary partition of England’ as Charles G. Harper, author of *The Hardy Country* puts it, lays out a national geography of regions, each complete and distinct in themselves, but available to the traveller who passes through as many of them as possible as he or she collects the complete set of books. It is also dependent on modes of transport, first the railways and then the motor car. The regionalisation of the nation in terms of fine art was a little slower to catch up with the huge success of the literary region, but its best known example (and by far the most prominent today), ‘Constable Country’, emerges with Herbert Cornish’s *The Constable Country* of 1932.<sup>3</sup>

Literary guides did not always lead to the most sophisticated readings of the works that gave the regions their names (and Charles Harper explicitly excludes any literary criticism from his *Hardy Country*). The reader/tourist is both invited to immerse himself or herself in the specific topographic and ethnographic features of the region and to render

transparent, as far as possible, the techniques of writing or art that produced them. But this is not the only way to think of a region in terms of artistic production. It is possible also to identify regions whose geography depends on an awareness and an acknowledgment of the modes of production and consumption—publishing, exhibiting, reading and viewing--that constitute them. In this way, we can think of a region as a curated space, made visible by the artistic forms it produces but also by the forces that govern it, decide its limits, write its manifesto, judge its value and – by all or some of these processes – impose a homogenising vision that calls the region into being. The curated region does not free itself from all the complex history and various uses of the term ‘region’ that I have just described, but it does invite us to move away from the binary of the region as either organic or imposed. If all regions are more or less imagined, then the curated region gives us the opportunity to explore how these acts of imagination take place – how the various claims of economy, geography, transport and the institutions of art and literature compete or collaborate to define a region.

The two regions that are the subject of this essay are the border counties of England and Scotland, and the transpennine corridor that links the English West and East Coast between Liverpool and Hull. These have very different histories. The Borders took their most defined political and geographical shape between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, when a series of mirrored Marches, or governed districts, was established to keep the peace in the lawless regions between the two nations. The transpennine area is one that comes into being with modern transport links, first the opening of the Manchester to Leeds railway line in the nineteenth century and then the M62 motorway in the 1970s. Yet despite their historical separation, these Northern regions share some interesting correspondences. Both grow out of cultural oppositions and physical boundaries. The border between England and Scotland is marked by the River Tweed for part of its length, and by centuries of cross-border warfare and rieving that have entered into its cultural mythologies. The transpennine region is divided

not only by the physical barrier of the Pennine Chain, but also by rivalries between Lancashire and Yorkshire that still play out in popular culture and sporting events. These regions are not associated with their centripetal character, in which central features are used to determine the extent of their external contours, yet both, at different times, have been curated regions through other means.

My two examples are of regions that have emerged in a process of cultural identification that uses a complex mixture of assimilation and homogenisation on the one hand, and diversification and fluid process on the other. The first is the ‘Scottish Border’ named in Walter Scott’s collection of ballads, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, of 1802. Scott drew many of his texts from a pre-existing network of ballad-singing and publishing that formed a loose and fluid system of exchange, performance and collection on either side of the English/Scottish border, but it was the publication of the best-selling *Minstrelsy*, along with other antiquarian collections by editors who saw the ballads as a formal artistic tradition rather than as an immediate activity, that gave the region its name and literary association. My second example advances two centuries to Artranspennine98. This project was a linked series of exhibitions and installations of contemporary art in 1998 that crossed the North of England between Liverpool on the west and Hull on the east, and was overseen by the Tate Gallery in Liverpool and the Henry Moore institute in Leeds. It encompassed existing art galleries, and invited additional new pieces. Not all the exhibits remain viewable today, but the whole project was extensively documented in the book *Leaving Tracks*, from which I draw much of my information about the way Artranspennine98 was curated.<sup>4</sup>

In some ways these curated regions are equal but opposite, the products of very different historical relations between art and economics. Artranspennine98, funded chiefly from a very large grant from the National Lottery, was planned by the two major art institutions from the start. The Scottish Border was a bricolage of ballad production that was

nominated as a cultural region in the light of the way this pre-existing literary activity was perceived. The Artranspennine<sup>98</sup> curators were explicit about their own financial responsibility as well as about resource-distribution from the centre. Scott never mentions his own financial stake in the ballad market, although the *Minstrelsy* was a major publishing success – the view of ballad culture that it represents is one of spontaneous recitation and a popular tradition untrammelled by any economic considerations. But these differences nevertheless encompass the same questions that the idea of the curated region poses: who curates the region, and what is the relation of that act of curation to the local forms of art that are assumed or proposed to constitute the region?

Both these northern regions stake a historical as well as a geographical claim. Ballads not only move between villages and small market towns, they are also full of references to them and – even more commonly – to proper names derived from local geographical features: ‘The Raid of the Reidswire’, ‘Jamie Telfer of the Fair Dodhead’, ‘The Lads of Wamphray’. Scott, as regional curator, repeatedly explains these place names in his extensive notes. As he does this, he performs a double function – both affirming the singularity of a region not well-known to the majority of readers, and translating that singularity into general ideas about the customs and language of rural population. Artranspennine<sup>98</sup> was conceived as taking responsibility for preserving and memorializing in an act of regional memory. The exhibition guide frequently draws connections between the individual exhibits and local history, often in the form of the region’s industrial past. Bernd and Hilla Becher’s photographs of industrial machinery, for example, are said to ‘recall a lost heritage and way of life’.<sup>5</sup> *Leaving Tracks* describes the sculptor Jannis Kounellis on a journey through the landscape into the past as he drives through the area. Kounellis surveys the locality: ‘On the outskirts of Halifax, the road took a sharp right turn and suddenly a new landscape emerged – the urban and industrial



sprawl of Halifax [...] The intrinsic historical link of the rural and industrial landscapes had been noted.’<sup>6</sup>

The assimilation of the local into art, or the responsibility of art to the local, is fundamental to the curated region, though it is not straightforward. The conceptualisation of both these regions is based on ideas of collaboration, staking a claim to having emerged from the local population, but, again, in different ways. What links them is that the performance of collaboration is inseparable from one of curation. In both, the scene of cultural production is seen to emerge from or in response to a local population. In the case of the Borders, this claim comes at the congruence of two different ways of thinking about ‘the people’. First, the small, local publishers that brought out broadsides (single sheet ballads) and collections of ballads and songs did so for a fast-circulating local market through which popular, well-known songs moved rapidly. Shifting in and out of oral and printed forms, the Border ballads shared space with all sorts of other literary forms – court poetry from the sixteenth century, work songs, drinking songs, and sometimes occasional poems written for publication in journals. The ballad, as an authentic voice of ‘the people’ was not, in this commercial market for cheap publications, necessarily different from other forms of poetry. It was one of a number of marketable forms of writing that ranged from sermons (a hugely popular genre in the eighteenth century) to the latest hits from the pleasure gardens and opera houses of English cities. The Haddington bookseller and printer George Miller ran beneath his imprint: ‘at whose Shop may be had a variety of Pamphlets, Ballads, Children's Books, Pictures, Catechisms, &c.’<sup>7</sup>

Ballads, then, take their place in a heterogeneous market. They respond rapidly to public demand and are a mobile, peripatetic form. The counties lying either side of the border between England and Scotland form a network of small printers and publishers. Edinburgh became in the early nineteenth century one of the major publishing centres of Europe, but

many ballads were published in smaller Borders towns – Kelso, Haddington, Hawick, Stockton and Durham among others. Printers and booksellers could be different entities, and books travelled from presses in larger towns to sellers in local markets. The transportation routes were often ad hoc – printed ballads could travel with itinerant tradespeople, or on occasion a printer or bookseller would take down a ballad from recitation by a visitor to the shop and print it.<sup>8</sup> Books were published for very local markets. George Caw’s *Poetical Museum* (a source for later collections of ballads) contains a subscription list that gives the occupations as well as the locations of the people who bought it: a breeches-maker in Hawick, a baker in Melrose, a saddler in Jedburgh among others.<sup>9</sup> Ballad publication was eclectic, responding to local purchasing power, and located in a loose network of printers and sellers across the Borders region. But at the same time, this region was coming into focus in a more homogenised way, with a more direct cultural organising principle that curated this network into a recognisable area that would now be called the ‘Scottish Borders’. Ballads had existed in various forms – oral recitation, single sheet broadsides, and small pamphlets or chapbooks. In these forms they existed, circulated and fell in and out of memory for several centuries, until a growing interest in antiquarianism began to organise them into collections. It is this spirit of antiquarianism that starts to curate the Border region, turning it from an assortment of different forms and a loosely-connected network of producers and consumers into a cultural region, homogenised through selectivity and – increasingly as collections moved into the nineteenth century – through the identification of local history and the extrapolation of that history into a newly unified ‘voice of the people’. Increasingly removed from the social practices that shaped them, ballads come to stand for primitive humanity itself.

Walter Scott’s method in assembling his collection was on the one hand highly collaborative. Some of his ballad texts came from earlier printed collections, but others he

collected in the rural areas in which he had spent much of his childhood. The *Minstrelsy* emerged from a complex network of transmission. Scott, or more usually his friends and assistants, did undertake what we would now call ethnographic fieldwork, transcribing ballads from the oral recitation of local people. But Scott also curated his collection with a certain distrust of the class of people from whom many of the ballad texts emanated. He does not regard the transmitters of the ballad texts as creators in their own right, and regrets the changes in the texts that occur during their circulation. His own role, as he sees it, is to present the ballads that come to him in their most ‘poetical’ form, and tells his readers that in cases of textual uncertainty he ‘has uniformly preserved what seemed to him the best, or most poetical, reading of the passage.’<sup>10</sup>

Scott had inherited the idea that the ballads come from a simpler state of society when art is the germ from which the full expression of human feeling in a ‘civilised’ society would arise. His most significant predecessor, Thomas Percy, had imagined the originators of the ballads as bards, or highly-respected individuals in primitive society who ‘contributed to soften the roughness of a martial and unlettered people by their songs and by their music.’<sup>11</sup> Scott mediates, sometimes uneasily, between his commitment to the local resonance of the *Minstrelsy* and his desire to distil these local voices into the Romantic idea of a natural voice of pure feeling from an earlier time: ‘passages might be pointed out, in which the rude minstrel has melted in natural pathos, or risen into rude energy. Even where these graces are totally wanting, the interest of the stories themselves, and the curious picture of manners, which they frequently present, authorise them to claim some respect from the public.’<sup>12</sup>

The effect of the *Minstrelsy* – strengthened by Scott’s later publications set in the same area – was to create the region as a literary landscape. In the glut of literary guide books in the early twentieth century, W. S. Crockett’s *In the Border Country* is dedicated to Scott’s memory and opens with the observation: ‘If you ask a friend whether he knows the Border

Country, he will probably answer yes, and then go on to say that he when a lad at school was a great reader of Scott.’<sup>13</sup> But if the result of Scott’s curation of the Scottish Border was to homogenise and reshape existing modes of literary production, the curators of Artranspennine98 faced a different task. Scott acknowledges some, though far from all the acts of collaboration as they occur to him in his introduction to the *Minstrelsy*, but for the exhibition, a partnership with the region was imagined by the project from the start. Its stated aim was to address questions of regional identity, partly simply by shifting major resources from London, but also through a policy of interaction with the locality that could be conceived as a form of curation:

We have built on existing talents, skills, knowledge and partnerships between organisations wherever possible, and recognised the fundamental importance of the artwork’s ‘first audience’ – all those who must collaborate with an artist in the successful creation of a work of art outside the studio environment. And we have evolved a curatorial approach to the exhibition which is grounded equally in our position in relation to the world of contemporary art and in relation to the culture of the region in which we work.<sup>14</sup>

The aim, stated in the exhibition guide, was explicitly regional – to produce ‘art which enriches our understanding of the region at the same time as the region is enriching our understanding of the art’.<sup>15</sup> In an effort to move away from the international model of blockbuster exhibits moving round the world with no connection to the particular places in which they are shown, the curators sought to ‘put down the necessary roots into the surrounding communities to create the audience to enjoy and participate in contemporary visual art’.<sup>16</sup>

As we have seen, the focus of this regional attachment was partly historical and the pieces were commissioned to respond visually to the landscapes and industries of the region. Memorialising the concentration of industry in the towns and cities of Yorkshire and Lancashire, the exhibition recognised that ‘the transpennine region itself bears enduring testimony to the confidence and optimism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in its civic and industrial buildings’.<sup>17</sup> The reception of these aspirations was mixed. Some of the attempts to be local were rejected by the audiences they were supposed to reach. The Storey Gallery in Lancaster staged Mark Dion’s installation ‘The Tasting Garden’ – a garden space planted with fruit trees and including bronze sculptures of fruit within walkways in arboreal formations. The installation explicitly aspired to both the local and the dialogic. It was designed to be both locally recognisable and challengingly other: ‘the tree varieties were selected both for their compatibility with Lancaster’s local environment and for the unusual qualities of their fruit’.<sup>18</sup> But the installation did not entirely fulfil its own ambitions. The local visitors to the exhibition had differing expectations of the relationship between a garden and a gallery. The report in a local newspaper quoted visitors complaining that the trees were dying, and a curator John Angus from the Storey Gallery admitted ‘People think it’s a garden but it’s an art work and, like any other work of art, it’s had a mixed reaction. It’s not what people expect a garden to look like.’<sup>19</sup>(Reported in Lancaster Citizen 16<sup>th</sup> July 1998)

Other parts of the exhibition made the act of consultation itself their subject. Tracy Mackenna and Edwin Janssen made a web feature with the title ‘Of All Places: Ed and Ellis in the Transpennine region’. During the lifetime of Artranspennine98, and following routes connecting its components, the artists drove round the area in a car marked ‘Of All Places’ distributing specially prepared material about the project including statements, questions, posters, flyers and balloons. They then created a website that presented the stories, souvenirs photographs and videos that they had collected during the eight journeys they took through

the region, making an evolving record of local response without any expectation of what those responses might be: 'With each successive trip to the region, the artists were required to make a fresh appraisal of what they had done previously, reconsidering the exhibition and the area in the light of recent discoveries and battling to keep up with the internal momentum of the show'.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the exhibition itself, the 'Ed and Ellis' site did not start from the presumption of local responsibility but allowed their collaboration with local people to evolve through continuous reaction.<sup>21</sup> And it also addressed questions of transport, mobility and direction that were raised by the exhibition's attempt to create what the geographer Denis Cosgrove calls 'the region as gallery'. He draws attention to the necessary fluidity of the curated region:

Different journeys through the works might exhibit different 'regions', different Transpennines. This is a function of both the order of viewing of the art works themselves and of the geographical connections made between them: route taken, mode of transport, time of day, weather. All these aspects are far less under the control of the exhibitor than in the case of a gallery, yet they are critical to the gallery as region.<sup>22</sup>

Cosgrove points to an instability in Artranspennine98 that was never resolved. The project was infused with a debate about its own aims and regional ambitions. The following year Robert Hopper of the Henry Moore Sculpture Trust, who with Lewis Biggs of the Liverpool Tate had co-curated Artranspennine98, took part in a discussion with a number of artists and project managers from the exhibition. The debate, interestingly inclusive, pointed up the difficulties of defining a region, repeatedly returning to the related questions of scale and perception. Some people felt that the exhibition had been too fragmentary, others that it had been too large. Both these anxieties about scale were felt to compromise the attempt to respond to and collaborate with local people. Penelope Curtis, from the Henry Moore

institute, commented that the exhibition ‘was not “one thing” and that was the problem. Robert and Lewis had the job of describing it as one thing, but in the end regionalism is a non-subject for artists’.<sup>23</sup> Other participants supported the idea that ‘The region came first’ and that the exhibition was founded on continuities between ‘people, place, ecology and culture’.<sup>24</sup> Another anxiety was that the exhibition had been too big and too extensive: ‘Artranspennine98 had the smack of a giant organisation, of a huge regional spread [...] I mean, what is the next move? Fill a country?’<sup>25</sup>

Lying behind this debate about the scale and reach of the exhibition – the way it could be imagined in time and space – is a spatial structure that informs both our curated regions and that I will call the space of Romance. Both regions sustain their identity in the relations between mapped delimitations and imaginary spaces. This is not quite as simply as a local actuality and a larger abstraction, as the micro and macro continually imply each other, but that distinction can introduce the role of the Romance space in the regional artistic geography. I use the term ‘Romance’ here in a specific sense. Modernity establishes itself against a past characterised by all the things that modernity seeks to leave behind (the irrational, the superstitious, the a-temporal, the primitive). But, as Ian Duncan has argued, modernity also inaugurates those categories to set against itself, and thereby preserves them in specific cultural forms in which they can be absorbed back into the modern society that produces them. In late eighteenth-century Britain, the key mode through which this transformation took place was antiquarianism. Duncan writes:

Antiquarian scholars and poets redefined romance as the scattered relics of an ancestral culture that was disintegrating under the pressures of modernization. Its strangeness -- its difference from modern experience -- was the effect of this loss: and thus the aura of its authenticity. Romance was the *genius loci* of the last age, to be preserved in the print-medium of the nation-state as its native essence.<sup>26</sup>

The Romance space of the cultural ‘North’ in the late eighteenth century (before the emergence of the industrial North of England in literature in the mid-nineteenth century) was the ‘North Country’, variously spelled in the literature as ‘countreye’, ‘countree’ and ‘countrie’ to locate it in a world before commercial print culture and its attendant standardising of spelling had taken root. The North Country is a place of song. In the one of the most important publications in the self-conscious antiquing (or ‘distressing’ as Susan Stewart calls it<sup>27</sup>) of popular literature for a middle-class readership, this region is identified in Thomas Percy’s collection of English and Scottish ballads and Early Modern poetry, *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* of 1765: ‘There is hardly an ancient Ballad or Romance, wherein a Minstrel or Harper appears, but he is characterized by way of eminence to have been “OF THE NORTH COUNTREYE”’.<sup>28</sup> The geography of the North Country is not produced by national borders, or at least not limited by them, but remains indicative of an idealised national spirit based on its cultural expression. The Scottish antiquarian John Pinkerton observes in *Ancient Scotch Poetry* (1786) that ‘the old English bards being all of the *north countrie*, and their metrical romances being almost Scottish, because the language spoken in the North of England and the South of Scotland was anciently almost the same; as it is at this day.’<sup>29</sup> This ‘North Country’ is an abstraction of the various northern sites of production that printed and circulated the ballads. Whereas one might actually visit Kelso or Stockton, the North Country is an ineffable region that does not respect geographical borders, nation states, or regions, while producing a sublimated version of all of them. Its very non-specificity gives the ballads an archaic authority as bearers of a popular voice that can stand for the abstractions of nation, or history, or art. For Scott, the old ‘North Country’ with its attendant authenticity of popular voice, could be transformed into the modern nation of Great Britain. His work with ballads will ‘contribute somewhat to the history of [his] native country; the peculiar features of



whose manners and character are daily melting and dissolving into those of her sister and ally'.<sup>30</sup>

Artranspennine98's difficulties in reflecting the local led to an intermittent appeal to universal principles, often invoking a transcendent natural force underlying the region's history. But the Romance space that underpinned this curated region was both modern and very old. The route of Artranspennine98 followed approximately the course of the M62 motorway. In one sense, this confirmed the regional specificity – the motorway, though among the most heavily used in the UK – does not reveal a pattern of end-to-end travel.<sup>31</sup> Like the Artranspennine98 project, the motorway links smaller units of place rather than offering a linear route through them all, and the guide to the exhibition made the point that the spatial organisation was to draw attention to the motorway rather than to the trans-Pennine railway. But at another level, the motorway forms a link in a much greater chain, the E20 route, itself part of the E-road network drawn up by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. This was also alluded to in the exhibition guide: 'In the view of the European commissioners, the region is one of the fundamental transport corridors of the Continent.'<sup>32</sup> The E (for 'Europe') 20 is primarily a trade route, but it is also an imaginary one that would be difficult to travel in its entirety even if anyone wanted to undertake such a journey. Starting from Limerick in Ireland and finishing in St Petersburg in Russia, the E20 is more theoretical than actual and its function is as much symbolic as it is practical, evoking an imaginary voyage that expresses the perfectibility of Europe – 'the growth corridor for the 21<sup>st</sup> century'.<sup>33</sup> Michael Hebbert, in a study of the geographical, economic and cultural identity of the transpennine region, comments on the expansive nature of its space: 'As a case study of an interregional corridor it invites consideration of the nature of boundary-spanning spaces in a boundary-dissolving Europe.'<sup>34</sup>

Although this is a Romance of the future, it also echoes the ancient narrative/spatial structure of the mediaeval Romance, the symbolic quest for a goal that cannot be materially realised but the pursuit of which is a good in itself. The imbrication of a pre-modern past and a projected future – and the Romance geographies of the whole project – are reflected in one of the pieces commissioned for Artranspennine98, a series of works by the American artists Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison at the Bluecoat Gallery in Liverpool under the title *Casting a Green Net: Can It Be We Are Seeing A Dragon?* The piece took the form of five maps of the exhibition region, using colour and shape to re-imagine its geography as if the natural landscape had been allowed to regenerate. The exhibition guide, as it tends to do, points up (somewhat loosely) connections with regional history. The Harrisons' geographical research is said to correspond with the 'way that in the past the sons of Liverpool merchants would have been presented with the possibilities for global trade.'<sup>35</sup> The maps appeal to a pre-historical space in their call for the regeneration of the area. The work 'dispelled doubts about the practicality of establishing such a green net' by appealing to natural processes that lie outside history: 'Our soils and vegetation have appeared since the ice age without the help of man'.<sup>36</sup> The maps show an idealised region in which 'city edges were set back, flowering meadows were re-established and woodlands permitted to spread.'<sup>37</sup>

The visual metaphor of the dragon – a beast from Romance – expresses not only this ecological ideal but also the spatial Romance of the Artranspennine98 project. Like the quest narrative of mediaeval Romance, the Dragon gives an artistic form to the ideal of a journey that reaches towards absolutes and potentials, or a 'pathway to sustainability' as the artists called it. In the artists' own words posted on their website The Harrison's Studio, the Dragon's visible form represents the transpennine region as both a readable map of a modern European region, and an ineffable ideal:

An astonishing image emerges, reading as an awkward strangely shaped dragon in flight, with a lake for its eye. Its head is at Hull, pointing east to Denmark and the Baltic Sea. Its tail is slightly curled at the estuary of the Mersey, but pointing west to the Irish Sea and the Atlantic. The possibility for new patterns suddenly becomes visible. Within this flying dragon image, these patterns suggested that a new multi-leveled gestalt is available, encompassing culture in its broadest sense; urban, agricultural, economic, geological, and of course, ecological values. From this vision comes the title of this work, *Are we Seeing a Dragon?*

We call such an image such as this, when it appears, a sustainability icon since it serves to delineate a pathway to sustainability; an emergent new history capable of expressing an overall ecology of place.

The Romance spaces of the North Country and the E20 route link these two curated regions of the Scottish Border and the transpennine corridor and also, despite their very real social differences, unite them in a historical moment of modernity. Both share a certain ideal or telos – the possibility that a region really could be expressed and delineated in art. From a heterogeneous and ephemeral body of publications there emerged various volumes that consolidated and homogenised an ‘authentic’ ballad tradition whose historical value depended on its antiquarian editors. In the case of *Artranspennine98*, the seminar recorded in *Leaving Tracks* sees its curators explicitly proposing their right to identify a region drawn from a heterogeneous substrate:

*Penelope [Curtis]:* You talk about revealing the region, but there isn’t really a transpennine region.

*Robert [Hopper]:* How can you say that? I know, historically you are correct, but what makes a region? It’s somebody drawing arbitrary lines on a map, enacting a bit

of legislation, or conquering someone else and building a wall. We have as much right as anyone to propose a region.<sup>38</sup>

The most recent exhibition under the Artranspennine name was Artranspennine08 whose instigators disavowed the principle of curation itself and, insofar as they admitted the possibility of a region, saw it as accidental rather than immanent: ‘our curatorial hand is almost absent, all we have done is enable Artranspennine08 to happen, we have constructed the infrastructure that will enable the work to be seen along the route whether people travel to see it or not.’<sup>39</sup> Artranspennine08’s postmodern refusal of art as a category of value, and its use of an internet blog to record its exhibits in a non-regional, placeless space distinguishes it from both our curated regions which, despite their historical separation, share much of the same claims to define their localities. The Borders of the early nineteenth century and the transpennine corridor of 1998 are both projects in which varied and eclectic social and cultural practices, records of local history, and responses to particular localities are drawn into the identification of a region. But at the same time, those specificities and singularities co-exist and interact with the ideal Romance spaces of the North Country and the European trade routes that underpin the complex structure of the curated region.

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<sup>1</sup> Jordan, introduction to *Regionalism Reconsidered: New Approaches to the Field*, xv – xvi.

<sup>2</sup> Dainotto, *Place in Literature: Regions, Cultures, Communities*, 21 – 22.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Cornish, *The Constable Country a Hundred Years after John Constable* (London: Heath Cranton, 1932). But see also the phenomenological philosopher Edward S. Casey’s study of ‘Constable Country’ in *Representing Place: Landscape, Painting and Maps*, 74 – 91.

<sup>4</sup> Barley, *Leaving Tracks: artranspennine98. An international contemporary visual art exhibition recorded*.

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<sup>5</sup> Mullins, *Artranspennine98: an exhibition of international contemporary visual art: exhibition guide*, 32.

<sup>6</sup> Barley, *Leaving Tracks*, 136.

<sup>7</sup> This line, with some variations, appeared on many of Millers' title pages. Miller's is one of the better-documented of Borders publishers. See W.J.Couper, *The Millers of Haddington, Dunbar and Dunfermline*.

<sup>8</sup> This information is drawn from the introduction to the forthcoming *Edinburgh Edition of the 'Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border'*, to be published in 3 volumes by Edinburgh University Press, and I am indebted to the editor Sigrid Rieuwers for allowing me to read a draft.

<sup>9</sup> Caw, *The Poetical Museum, Containing Songs and Poems on Almost Every Subject*, 387 – 392.

<sup>10</sup> Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, I: cxxiv.

<sup>11</sup> Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, I: ix. Despite the title, many of Percy's examples are Scottish.

<sup>12</sup> Scott, *Minstrelsy*, I: cxvi.

<sup>13</sup> Crockett, *In the Border Country*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Mullins, *Guide*, 3 – 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Barley, *Leaving Tracks*, 62.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>21</sup> This was to become the principle of Artranspennine03, an exhibition that relicensed the 'artranspennine' trademark and proceeded independently. Its curators, Nick Crowe and Ian

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Rawlinson, Costing much less than the 1998 exhibition, Artranspennine03 attempted a more critical and reflective response to local geographies, moving further away from galleries and into public spaces such as car parks and shopping centres. Less iconographic than the 1998 Artranspennine, the 2003 version was, as Neil Mulholland points out in his review of the exhibition, deliberately ephemeral and parodic of institutional art. See [www.frieze.com/issue/review/artranspennine03](http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/artranspennine03).

<sup>22</sup> Cosgrove, *Geographical Imagination and the Authority of Images*, 71.

<sup>23</sup> Curtis quoted in Barley, *Leaving Tracks*, 40.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>26</sup> Duncan, *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott, Dickens*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Literary Representation*, see especially chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>28</sup> Percy, *Reliques*, I: xxi.

<sup>29</sup> Pinkerton, *Ancient Scottish Poetry*, I: xvii.

<sup>30</sup> Scott, *Minstrelsy*, I, cxxxii.

<sup>31</sup> Travel survey data reveals a pattern of car travel creating two networks of shorter journeys on either side of the Pennines rather than of complete journeys across the country. See Hebbert, 'Transpennine: imaginative geographies of an interregional Corridor', 386.

<sup>32</sup> Mullins, *Guide*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Barley, *Leaving Tracks*, 18.

<sup>34</sup> Hebbert, 'Transpennine: imaginative geographies of an interregional Corridor', 380.

<sup>35</sup> Mullins, *Guide*, 29.

<sup>36</sup> Barley, *Leaving Tracks*, 119.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>38</sup> Hopper and Curtis, Barley, *Leaving Tracks*, 41.

<sup>39</sup> Harfleet and Jack, April 22, 2008 (02.31a.m.), “A History of Artstranspennine”,  
*Artstranspennine08*. ://atp08.blogspot.co.uk/2008/04/introduction.html

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